

PROLOGUE

I WASN'T sure how long I'd been running for or how much land I'd covered. When I felt the ground start to rise slowly uphill I knew it was a good sign. I was moving forward and not in circles. It was about the only thing that had gone right for me so far. The second I thought that, a red-hot stabbing pain burned along my spine. I yelled out and fell to my knees. It disappeared just as quickly as it came and I stumbled up, leaning on a tree for support. What was that? I tried to look down my back to make sure I hadn't been stabbed in the spine.

I took a few steps forward to start running and was brought crashing to the ground again by the same agonising feeling. Except this time it was worse. It felt like hundreds of small knives gouging through my skin from the inside out. The pain was beyond screams. My mouth opened and closed in silent agony as I lay on the forest floor, arching my back into the earth. It could have gone on for seconds, maybe minutes. All sense of time and reason was lost to me amid the excruciating pain.

And then it was gone. I was shaking, sweating, and I realised the whimpering sound I heard was coming from my own mouth.

Excruciating. This is what Steven had said it would be like, wasn't it?

I heard a shout somewhere off in the distance; far, but not far enough. Another shout returned it and I recognised Simon's scent on the wind.

No, I couldn't smell him. I was clearly still delirious from the after-effects of the pain, yet somehow I knew it was him coming for me. And the others.

I dragged myself up on all fours and stumbled into a light jog again, pushing myself to go faster and harder up the incline. I could hear them snapping back trees and cutting through the bush closer than I would have liked. I would not let them get me again. I would rather die. My vision went white as the pain rocked me. This time I stayed on my feet. They were too close.

If I was going to escape I couldn't lose any more time. I gripped a tree, digging my clawed hand into it and bit down on my lip until I felt blood running down my chin. I pushed forward. Shadows had replaced the light coming through the trees and I could sense darkness was nearly upon us. I stumbled, screamed and

sprinted in bursts as I battled with what was undoubtedly the worst pain I'd experienced in this or any lifetime.

I got a whiff of Simon, definitely Simon, Tiaki, James and most of the other Ihis. They were making incredible time and I could hear their footfalls getting closer as I tried to increase my pace.

I tore furiously at my shirts, suddenly frustrated by the material restricting my back and arms as I pumped them, urging myself to go faster. The clothing fell in shreds around me and I didn't worry about leaving a trail. They were too close anyway. I sprinted through the thinning trees with branches lashing at my face and body.

"Tommi!" I heard James shout. It sounded like he was practically at my neck. I smelt something in the air and sniffed. Salt. The ocean was close. I could even hear waves pounding heavily on what had to be rocks. I could swim. I wasn't sure if the Ihis could. I was hoping I was better. I broke through the last of the trees and onto clear land. I was on a grassy cliff top with the drop-off about 100 metres directly in front of me.

I paused for a second, suddenly transfixed by the glowing orb that appeared from behind the clouds. I saw it for only a moment before I was on the ground, screaming as the pain returned in all its searing glory. I dug my hands into the earth and felt tears as wave after wave of flesh-splitting torture washed over me. I heard a rip and a crack come from within my own body and I let out a brief cry as it happened. Then it happened again, over and over, faster and faster, until I was begging for death.

Death.

Sweet nothingness would be better than this suffering.

Death. Death. Death.

Somehow through the hell I sensed the Ihis emerge from the trees behind me. I smelt Steven among them. Impossible. As I heard their footsteps get closer I used every last fragment of will power I had left and sprinted towards the edge of the cliff. I caught them unaware and heard shouts of surprise behind me. I didn't look back. Within a few strides I realised I was moving faster than I'd ever moved before. I was bounding towards the edge on all four limbs, each stride throwing me powerfully closer to my goal. I didn't know what lay beneath

me. I could smell the ocean close by. Whether it was directly below me or hundreds of jagged rocks were, I didn't care. Freedom or death. Either option sounded promising.

"No!" I heard someone shout, but it was too late.

I launched myself far out over the cliff edge and into the air. I had a second of suspension before gravity took hold and I began to plummet. I screamed, and not with fear this time, with pure exhilaration. It took me a second to realise that I wasn't screaming at all. Following me down into the unknown was a piercing howl.

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